

# Chinese Ancestor Worship



Chinese Ancestor Worship:  
A Practice and Ritual Oriented Approach  
to Understanding Chinese Culture

By

William Lakos

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

---

P U B L I S H I N G

Chinese Ancestor Worship:  
A Practice and Ritual Oriented Approach to Understanding Chinese Culture,  
by William Lakos

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2010 by William Lakos

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2495-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2495-8

**For Lori**



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .....	ix
Acknowledgements .....	xi
Chapter One .....	1
Introduction: A New Approach to Understanding Chinese Culture	
Structure of the book	
Generalizations	
Translation	
Chapter Two .....	11
Watching the Ancestors	
The Chinese practice of ancestor worship	
Who were the ancestors?	
Ancestors: an historical view	
Ancestors: an anthropological view	
Practising ancestor worship	
Grave based worship	
Domestic ancestor worship	
Ancestor worship and larger kin groups	
Ancestor worship in recent times	
Conclusion	
Chapter Three .....	37
Mind-ing the Ancestors	
Exploring the meaning of ancestor worship	
Ancestor worship and Chinese philosophy	
The beginning of Chinese philosophy	
Different beginnings and worldviews	
The concept of change and other differences	
Ancestor worship and religion	
The social and political significance	
A confluence of <i>significants</i>	
Conclusion	

Chapter Four .....	57
Living with the Ancestors: Filial Piety	
Filial piety's connection with ancestor worship	
The social connection	
The religious connection	
The Classical connection	
The political connection	
Conclusion	
Chapter Five .....	81
Two Concepts of Ritual and Two Understandings of <i>Li</i>	
Ritual: as an aspect of Chinese culture	
Ritual as <i>li</i>	
<i>Li</i> expanded	
Ritual as communication	
Conclusion	
Chapter Six .....	101
Challenging the Master Narrative: <i>Confucianism-as-Chinese-Culture</i>	
Confucianism as a metonym for Chinese culture	
The Hermeneutical Problematic	
The Confucian texts	
Confucianism: a disputed term	
Elite Confucianism	
Confucianism's inception and Confucius' claims	
Epistemological problems and ideology	
Ethno-centric distortion	
Confucianism's negative Oriental narrative	
Practice, rationalism, Truth, and ritual	
Conclusion	
Chapter Seven.....	125
Conclusion and Consequences	
Bibliography .....	137
Index .....	145



## PREFACE

This book had its genesis in a confluence of ideas and experiences. As an undergraduate I majored in Philosophy and Asian Studies and was much influenced by the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and other modern European philosophers and writers, rapidly acquiring a post-modern, anti-positive, hermeneutic approach to my studies and research. While studying at the Tibetan University at Sarnath in India, I began to question the relationship between philosophy and culture, as I had before then thought that philosophy underpinned culture. Returning to Australia I wrote a long essay comparing Indian and Chinese philosophy, yet the relationship between these *holy* texts and what actually transpired in these immense cultures over thousands of years sustained an uneasy intellectual feeling within me. It was not until a fortuitous field trip to Vietnam that the necessary cerebral medicine to quell my unease became available to me.

Intent on investigating the Buddhist places of worship which, along with Catholicism and Communism underpinned (I assumed) much of Vietnamese culture, I was pleasantly astounded that to find that ancestor worship enjoyed a most privileged position in Buddhism, and even more unlikely, by those who professed to be Christian or non-religious socialists. Considering that Vietnam is and has been very much influenced by Chinese culture, I then wondered how influential ancestor worship is and has been in China. All my reading led me to believe that Confucianism, or at least the Three Religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism), had underpinned this long lasting culture, but now I was not so sure. Although it seemed absurd at the time, that the rituals pertaining to what I considered a lower order religion or superstition could replace as cultural foundations the great philosophical and religious texts of Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi, it felt right. As my inquiry deepened, my unease abated. I soon encountered the ideas of Clifford Geertz on symbol and culture; Pierre Bourdieu and Sherry Ortner on practice theory; James Carey and Eric Rothenbuhler on ritual, culture, and communication; and Benjamin Schwartz on ancient Chinese thinking, and my task became a labour of love. It is a love for the insight and courage of these thinkers and a fervent wish to *make things clear*. This is my task in this work.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank all my teachers and colleagues at the School of Asian Languages and Studies at the University of Tasmania. I dare not mention individuals lest I leave out some of you. Without your help and encouragement over the long life of this book, it would not have happened. The opportunity to visit China, India, and SE Asia many times over the past decade is much appreciated and has been invaluable. And thanks for allowing me to linger long after the completion of my PhD.

Thanks also to Dr Marcelo Stamm at the School of Philosophy who allowed and encouraged me to study the post-grad course on Wittgenstein even though I had not yet graduated. Many thanks also to (the once Venerable) Dr Sonam Thakchoe who tried to teach me Buddhism but instead inspired me to inquire into cultural epistemology. Also my humble thanks to the Monks and Lay Teachers at the Central University of Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, India who showed me the difference between the West and the East.

Although always mentioned last, my family has been the greatest help.



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION:

### A NEW APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING CHINESE CULTURE

It is not well known and appreciated in the West, that during its long and traditional history China developed and maintained a highly complex and successful culture, enabling it to extend the empire “so early to a world as vast as Europe and containing human beings of comparable diversity”(Gernet 1982, 27). No civilization in the world today has had a longer continuity than the Chinese (Ho 1976, 547). From its ancient beginnings until recent times China has withstood constant evolutionary changes. As a distinctive culture it has strongly underpinned a highly organized and continuous socio-political entity and it is wrong to assume that “the elimination of the Sino-Manchu dynasty in 1912 as the end of a two-thousand-year-old political system” (Gernet 1982, 21). The incessant surveillance since the 1950s, crippling regulation, and the persecution of religion that is attributed to CCP policies are not something new. For more than two thousand years the state has held absolute right of control and intervention over religious and other activities (Thompson 1973, 231), so it is therefore not logical to infer a necessary and irreparable disjunction due to the CCP policies alone. Joseph Levenson (1958, 156) was suggesting its continuous nature when he wrote that:

“[Maybe] China is forever China, as the saying is, absorbing everyone, and nothing has been new in a crowded century except ephemeral detail, spilling over a changeless paradigm of Chinese history.”

The continuity of Chinese civilization is an extraordinary example of longevity, yet this extraordinary success story is only just beginning to be appreciated, and only rarely explained. As a distinctive characteristic, this successful cultural continuity is most often ignored.

The West's understanding of China and Chinese culture is problematical to a significant degree as a consequence of Western hegemony and ethnocentrism imposing its own values, meanings, and conceptual paradigms and the problematic has been further exacerbated by the Chinese themselves as they inhere the Western understanding. In order to ameliorate and overcome the epistemological problematic of a cross-cultural understanding of China, a new approach to the understanding of China and Chinese culture is proposed. This book argues that the practice of ancestor worship has underpinned Chinese culture in many influential and vital ways, and an examination of the practice of ancestor worship and its corollaries will lead to a better and more nuanced understanding. In the Chinese cultural realm, ancestors, self, and heirs are connected in a web of relationships bounded by harmony, hierarchy and mutual dependence. Despite their participation and interest in other various beliefs and religions, reverence towards ancestors has always been part of Chinese life and as a factor in Chinese life and culture Chinese ancestor worship cannot be over-emphasized.

However while the importance of ancestor worship to Chinese culture was well recognized in ancient and classical China, ancestor worship is generally seen by Western contemporary scholarship as being of less importance than it once was, of no importance, or even as a negative. Furthermore, if there is some kind of agreement or recognition concerning the importance of ancestor worship in Chinese traditional culture, "if we start asking more particular questions about this fundamental concern of the Chinese mind, we find that comparatively little is known" (Aijmer 1974, 232).

As a marker or key to understanding Chinese culture the relevance concerning understanding of ancestor worship is flawed and skewed, and its cultural significance most often ignored while at the same time the significance of Confucianism is over-promoted. The Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture paradigm is a kind of *Orientalism*, an Edward Said (1978) type of *Orientalism*, where (negative) views of China (as part of the Orient) were *manufactured* (Jensen 1997) by the attitudes and ideals of the era of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries, leading to a misunderstanding of the *other* culture: Chinese culture.

The Western constructed web of cultural reality framed by European centrism is difficult to change, as it has evolved into cultural myth, where contradictory or alternative positions most often dismissed and its

hegemonic power unchallenged. So-called orientalism is still a contemporary way of thinking and living, and not just an out-dated way of knowing from the colonial past; it is an integral part of modern Western thought and ideology. The West interprets and assesses Chinese culture with the inherent attitude that its own way of understanding is superior because it is invariably true. Despite the urge over the past half century or so by the West and the Western academy in particular to view China's culture through a paradigm loosely framed by Confucianism, some scholars argue that "the dynamics of Chinese society are still poorly understood" (Parish and Whyte 1978, 248). The rituals and ceremonies which have underpinned Chinese society, dominated as I will show by ancestor worship, are not important simply because they are a link with the past, but because they celebrate and reinforce core social relationships and values in the present lives of the Chinese people and they mirror the social world and the concerns of the living. It is these core social values and their inherent and vital importance to Chinese culture which are engaged with throughout this book. This vital importance becomes increasingly evident as the dominance of the social realm throughout Chinese history is examined.

The book is not about discovering new facts, but about re-arranging those that are already known, showing connections, and making a case for this new arrangement as an alternative means for in understanding Chinese culture. At the hub of a constellation of theories utilized here is practice theory. Practice theory is not a theory in the traditional sense in that it does not make a set of general claims in order to comprehensively explain a particular phenomenon. It is a way of understanding culture which avoids a single, unifying theory. It is as an argument that primarily concerns itself with what people do, and asks why these practices have been practiced and what were and are the conditions for their existence and what have been and are their implications.

Practice theory appeared at the end of the 20th century as an alternative approach towards cultural analysis and cultural comparison. It "is a general theory of the production of social subjects through practice in the world, and the production of the world itself through practice" (Ortner 2006, 16). Practice theory does not propose a theory as such, in that it does not organize or systematize data or scientific generalizations that provide comprehensive explanations about the phenomena in question. Nor does it bow to the burden of a particular kind of argument or logic. Anthropologists and sociologists have for a long time referred to the shared practices of the culture or society under review, however in more recent times these

references have become more important. In some cases a practice approach to understanding culture has become extreme and as far as some researches are concerned “practice is all there is to study and describe” (Barnes 2001, 17).

The cultural symbols or practices that are of central concern to this study are the rituals of ancestor worship. The concern with ritual is more than just as a cultural symbol per se. Ritual is also communication, and as communication, it is a powerful and most effective form of cultural communication. From a socio-religious point of view it is an element of the serious life. All cultures utilize ritual as a symbolic means of maintenance, and for adapting to outside influences. John Dewey (1966, 5-6) reminds us of the connections between community, commonality, and communication, and James W. Carey (1990) shows us these connections in light of ritual communication. In order to be considered as a community and to have a culture, certain things must be shared in common, such as “aims, beliefs, aspirations, and knowledge – a common understanding – likemindedness, as sociologists say....Consensus demands communication”. The ritual view of communication focuses on original, socially significant meaning and the preservation of society in time. Transmission accentuates power and control, whereas ritual accentuates social participation and culture. An understanding of communication as culture, and a ritual view of communication, implies that culture defines and maintains itself through ritual.

## **Structure of the book**

The first five chapters are an exposition of ancestor worship and its corollaries and show that ancestor worship is complex (when analyzed), and may be seen, described, and understood in many ways. The key function of the ancestors in Chinese culture is not at first apparent, however clarity of their vital function is gradually achieved as the description unfolds. Only through considering all the connections to ancestor worship can the twin goals of a better account of Chinese ancestor worship, and of a better cultural understanding be achieved. The many views or various descriptions offered amount to an argument of cumulative evidence such as may be found in a court room.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two, “Watching the Ancestors”, provides not only a description of what ancestor worship is, but also introduces ancestor worship as a practice that has been ubiquitous



throughout Chinese history. Its purpose is to establish a cognitive starting point by exploring the meaning of ancestor worship in all its semantic scope. It provides an introduction to the subject and a provisional work-in-progress meaning of the term ancestor worship. The term is discussed and the general and stereotypical views of what is meant by this term, which includes its metonyms, synonyms, links, and correlations, are examined.

Ancestor worship and the traditional Chinese kinship system are presented, initially, in an ahistorical form, as though they are unchanging and permanent. This snapshot rather than the moving picture approach is required at this stage as an aid for conceptual clarity. Of course such a presentation is a distortion in that ancestor worship, like all other traditional and cultural events, was not static but changed as circumstances unfolded. This evolving and changing nature is addressed throughout the remainder of the book. The archaeological and historical evidence provided will support the proposition that ancestor worship has been practiced by the Chinese since the earliest recorded times. It will show that the ancient Chinese of the Shang dynasty, and even earlier, were worshipping and sacrificing to their ancestors, and that this has been important and significant to their society and their culture ever since. Ancestor worship was not just a practice of the ancient elite or nobility. Since the earliest beginnings of Chinese culture the ancestors of the majority of the common people have received an inordinate amount of attention. The exposition shows that there are a number of kinds or types of ancestor worship and various ways in which it may be categorized and understood. There are also many types of ancestors and a variety of ways that the realms that these ancestors inhabited could be understood.

The next chapter (3) shows the significance of ancestor worship as it is expressed in Chinese thought through their philosophy and religion. It deals with the importance of the ancestors in the minds of the Chinese and in the Chinese mind, and in the inception of Chinese culture. Here we begin to see the unique aspects of Chinese culture that are necessarily connected to the worship of ancestors. Found in the rituals surrounding ancestor worship, the evolution of Chinese culture saw the development of certain worldviews which promoted and accepted a number of social ideas and strategies linked to ideas of family, hierarchy, and strength in harmony. Ancestor worship and its correlates together make up a paradigm model for the origination and inspiration of Chinese culture.

Ancestor worship highlighted the family and kin relationships, as a model for society. Ancestor worship and ritual also provided the individual and society with a set of values, especially in relation to social unity, such as order, benevolence, harmony and reciprocity. It provided links with the dead and gave rise and force to an ontological reality which supported both the now and the then. Ancestor worship and its corollaries not only ordered the socio-political realm, but also the cosmic. Ancestor worship eventually provided the grounds for the most enduring social system in world history. It provided the conditions, values, and rationale for the benefits of care and protection provided by families extending to the wider polity, and the sense of durability, order, hierarchy, and harmony within this society. This cultural optimism which understood and reacted to the world, reflected the importance the early Chinese placed on humanity as the centre of all things, on social harmony, and on an aesthetic approach to this human centered world which avoided abstract principles. This philosophy evolved and emerged from the practical activity of life – that is from its culture – and it generated an originative system of thinking which both consciously reflects and normatively guides Chinese culture.

In Chapter Four, “Living with the Ancestors”, the insights gleaned from the previous chapter are further developed as they help us understand the importance the ancestors in the social realm. This chapter engages with the discourse of the family and filial piety (and veneration as piety). The dominant social strategies and their incumbent social mores which originated in ancestor worship profoundly influenced not only the religious and philosophical views of the Chinese, but also the socio-political orders. The purpose of this chapter is to reinforce and re-emphasize connections. Filial piety confirms the individual, as a member of a larger family-kin-ancestor web, and that web as the conceptual and actual nexus in the *web of significant*s that is Chinese culture. It suggests a unified and dynamic world (view) – a world (view) not requiring a creator God. Its biological connections allow communication across space and time. Analogically, as a cultural connection, it connects the biological with the social and the political.

In a world underpinned by the reverence towards ancestors the individual exists by virtue of his descendents, and his ancestors exist only through him. The importance of the reciprocity of kinship values may be seen very clearly in Chinese family relationships, and in the phenomena of these relationships writ-large in the politico-social realm. The sense of

mutual responsibility between parents and son was central to the operation of the family as a continuing and strong unit, and conversely important for the operation of the state. One of the more particularly significant aspects of Chinese civilization has been its ability to maintain a highly organized, complex society over vast stretches of time and space.

Having established the ubiquity and importance of the rituals of ancestor worship in Chinese culture, the question of why these rituals have been the chosen means for communicating cultural values and strategies is engaged here in the next chapter (5), “Ritual and Ancestor Worship”. This analysis of ritual in Chinese culture and history discusses why ancestor worship, as a ritual, is more efficacious in understanding Chinese culture than the master narrative of Confucianism. It also shows the links between ancestor worship and Confucianism, and the place of Confucianism in the landscape of Chinese culture. It exposes the importance of ritual in Chinese culture and its co-relationship with a concern for the ancestors. It engages the topic in a number of ways. It analyses ritual as it is popularly portrayed as a general concern of the Chinese; ritual as communication; *li* as the Chinese word that is most often translated as ritual; and *li* in its (expanded) cultural, cosmic and metaphysical modes.

The underlying question of this chapter asks why ritual is so important. Why has ritual been such an important aspect of Chinese culture from ancient times and why has ritual played such a vital role in Chinese culture? What is the significance of rituals concerning the relationships between the living and the dead – from worldview to human and social values – from these values to the means and ways of living those values? The rituals involved in ancestor worship, and indeed any ritual, may be considered from many viewpoints. Ritual, as communication, is a powerful and a most effective form of cultural communication. From a sociological-religious point of view it is an element of the serious life. All cultures utilize ritual as a symbolic means of maintenance and for adapting to outside influences. Chinese ancestor rituals understood as cultural symbols, tell us much about Chinese culture.

Chapter Six, “Challenging the dominant discourse: Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture”, questions the efficacy of Confucianism as the master or dominant narrative of Chinese culture. Whereas the previous chapters and the core of the book is a positive statement and an extensive presentation of ancestor worship, this chapter counters the orthodox claim of Confucianism as that nexus of action and understanding of Chinese culture.

It is not claimed that Confucianism is not an important Chinese cultural heritage, nor is it disputed that Confucianism has a reinforcing role in ancestor worship. The clear aim of this chapter is to show the links between ancestor worship and Confucianism, and the correct place of Confucianism in the landscape of Chinese culture, dominated as it is conceptually by ancestor worship.

For many, Confucianism is the key to understanding Chinese culture and the ‘Chinese way of life for the last two thousand years’ (De Bary, Chan and Watson 1960, 15). It has become the master narrative for understanding Chinese culture and is the master narrative that this work seeks to debunk. I believe, along with Daniel Overmeyer (1995, 1), that there has ‘been an over-reliance in the past on [mainly Confucian] philosophical texts for understanding the mentality of early [and later] China’. The Confucian-as-Chinese-culture discourse suffers from dual drawbacks of problems to do with interpretation, and problems associated with comparison to Western paradigms of understanding and hegemonic discourses, again a problem of interpretation, but one of a different nature. Confucianism imposes unrealistic limits and constraints on an understanding of Chinese culture on the one hand, and on the other it brings with it extraneous concepts and ideas that have no bearing Chinese culture.

Confucianism is a generic Western term that has no corresponding term in the Chinese languages. When we refer to Chinese society and other societies influenced by China as Confucian societies or as Confucian cultures, the meaning of these terms is so widely disputed that it is of little practical use in attributing cultural value and significance. Confucianism also lends itself to a number of disciplinary approaches thus providing a narrative of great complexity and also of uncertainty and ambiguity. The outcome is often seen as contradictory and confusing and therefore it is often interpreted in a number of ways. Modern scholarship has provided a vast array of meanings and categories for understanding Confucianism, but the question still begs, which one do we choose in relation to understanding Chinese culture?

The major epistemological problem for the West in understanding China arises from the determined resolve of the West to impose its “transcendental pretense” (Solomon 1993, 3). Western Enlightenment thinking is dogmatic in that it is dismissive of any other different cultural views – this is its transcendental pretense. Hegel’s universal and absolute

idealism as ‘transcendental pretense’ was a form of ideological imperialism which reached absolute proportions. Confucianism as a master narrative has within it a Western “transcendental pretense”, and it is not an understanding within Chinese culture. The Chinese understand their own culture, as the study argues throughout, through a variety of deep and inherent norms, rituals and practices related to ancestor worship.

Having cleared the cognitive space for a more considered understanding of Chinese culture vis-à-vis ancestor worship, the final chapter (7) reinforces this understanding through a discussion of the relevance of ancestor worship and a culture imbued and rooted in ancestor worship to today’s world and to today’s Western world view. An important consequence of this part of the cross-cultural enterprise is the better understanding acquired, not only of China, but of Western culture.

The practice of ancestor worship, in traditional and neo-traditional modes, is on the increase, and becoming more generally accepted, as a correlation of the increased social self esteem of the Chinese, and as a consequence of the debates concerning Chinese identity and direction. Our contemporary understanding of Chinese culture is only interesting and worthwhile in light of future consequences, and so, while briefly summarizing the book’s underlying argument and providing an account of current ancestral practices in China, the emphasis here is on the consequences of such an understanding. That is, what difference does it make if Chinese culture is understood differently, for after all the difference is one of nuance, given that there is much overlap between the two paradigms? In concrete terms it means re-assessing some of the important *significants* (ideals, values, strategies) of our own Western culture, not for the sake of understanding ourselves better, (although this is a valid and worthwhile endeavor), but in order to adjust our own historical mind, in order to re-look at and re-assess if required, our views of China.

## Generalizations

Here I want to clarify, qualify, and say something about my approach and method that may be considered unusual; a caveat against conformity and conventionality. I have emphasised that a hermeneutical process is used throughout, and part of this process is to move from the general to the specific to the general. In trying to understand various things about China, I apply the very general concept of culture for this purpose; the aim to know more about culture (the more general concept), in order to know

more about things (the specific and particular), and the more known about things will help better understand the more general, and so on. China and Chinese culture fall into that category of a generalization, a stereotype, and the use of generalizations throughout this work is necessary and desirable. Part of the need for generalizations and stereotypes is the determination to synthesize the multi-vocality of cultural voices from different regions and various historical eras – a striving for the whole of culture. There is an inherent worth in advancing on common stereotypes through comparative analysis. The conscious act of continual redefinition of the other in relation to self is a requisite condition of ongoing learning.

Questions about who exactly are the Chinese as they constitute the participants of their culture, is not a concern of a generalization. Nor does it matter overly much that at times I will refer to the Western *other*, sometimes meaning more the Western academy, sometimes the more general field of those influenced by the academy, sometimes a general field of intelligentsia and leaders, and sometimes just the chattering classes. Most times I will situate the meaning within how I am using the generalization at the time. However, at all times I am treating the generalized term as just that: general, stereotypical, sometimes universal, but always non-specific – just as it should be treated. So my caveat here is that my emphasis many times throughout will be general, and a precise meaning should not be sought. Although essentialist traditions dominant thought in the Western world, an awareness of the cultural differences between China and ourselves leads us to an understanding that the world we live in is one of cultural constructs. It is these general constructs which are of most interest here. Comparative cultural perspectives as illustrated here by concepts like China and the West, culture and ideology, seek to clarify issues which deserve to be tested against more differentiated versions of each entity.

## Translation

All of the original Chinese texts quoted have been translated into English. There are many translations and interpretations of these texts; however, where possible, I have opted for the better known translations by James Legge, Arthur Waley, Wing-tsit Chan and Burton Watson. Of the two major systems for transliterating Chinese characters, Wade-Giles and pinyin, I have chosen pinyin, the official and most widely used. However I will retain the use of some Wade-Giles transcription for some well known names and as they are used in the translations.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WATCHING THE ANCESTORS

It has long been observed that ancestor worship is much more than just some simple practices and ceremonies for the departed kin and that its cultural implications are enormous and considerable, however, why ancestor worship has been important is not at first apparent. This and the following chapters will gradually reveal that the importance lies in its connections; connections to the family; from the family to whole socio-political realm; and to the dominance of this realm in Chinese history. However, in order to gain an understanding of the full significance of ancestor worship, it is first necessary to examine the concrete practices which constitute this phenomenon.

“No attempt to understand the Chinese can be anything but imperfect without at least a brief description of the ritual practices concerning the departed kin, ancestor worship and ancestor veneration” (Latourette 1964, 537).

#### **The Chinese practice of ancestor worship**

As has been observed by various scholars of classical China, the Chinese concern with ancestor worship has been ubiquitous and essential for the “entire development of Chinese civilization” (Schwartz 1985, 21). “The whole pattern of Chinese life and thought was set in the ancient and classical times” (Harrison 1972, 3). Indeed, according to another scholar, “to the extent that it is possible to speak of one strategic custom or institution in the mix of early China’s cultural variables..., it would seem to be ancestor worship” (Keightley 1990, 44-45). Therefore it is reasonable to assume that to understand Chinese culture, it is necessary to go to the very beginning of its inception and to the beginning of ancestor worship.

Although the physical origin of the Chinese people is still much debated and is a subject not fully understood, recent research and

scholarship has provided a historical picture of much improved clarity from what was known and mythologized in the past. Archaeological evidence such as inscriptions on bronzes and newly excavated Zhou oracle bones fit together with the literary records of ancient places, people, and events long known from the classics and earliest histories. These archaeological discoveries, especially over the last century, have replaced ancient myth and legend, although much of it has also been confirmed. Archaeological discoveries have revealed a complex picture of early Chinese development, where several regional cultures almost simultaneously achieved the transition from food gathering to food production and did not originate, as was once thought, in one area of the North China Plain.

These regional cultures included the “Yangshao culture of the middle Yellow river, the Dawenkou culture in Shandong, the Majiabang culture of the lower Yangzi River, and the Dapenkeng culture along the south coast and Taiwan” (Roberts 2006, 2).

More so than most other cultures, the more significant aspects of China’s culture began in ancient times. By the time of the Han era, “many of the features we think of as typically Chinese were already in evidence (Milston 1978, 45).” David Keightley (1990, 22) poetically describes this “remarkable” phenomena of continuity when he writes that “it is probably truer for China than for most parts of the world that as the Neolithic twig was bent the modern tree has inclined.” Many of the distinctive features of contemporary Chinese culture, such as autocratic central government, acceptance of hierarchy, and the emphasis on family, began in those earliest of historic times and there is no doubt that the early history of China is of crucial relevance in any understanding of China. It is China’s remarkable cultural continuity that makes it imperative to study China’s past, even when considering China’s present

Over 10,000 years ago, at the beginning of the Neolithic period China, the climatic conditions were favourable to the development of early Chinese culture.

“At some point, probably still in the Neolithic, the commemoration of the dead - a feature common to many early cultures, including the Greek and Mesopotamian - probably became more orderly and articulated in China, taking on an ideological and juridical power of its own” (Keightley 1990, 45).



The Neolithic Chinese spent much of their time and effort in burying their dead and maintaining them after death. The dead were set apart in what looks like kinship groupings; they were worshipped, being the subject of religious-like practices and oracle bone divination where the living were attempting to communicate with the dead. Evidence from the late Neolithic period suggests that the community invested enormous amounts of their energy on tombs, coffins and other artifacts buried with the ancestors and that the ancestors had already achieved a very high status at this time.

During the Yangshao period, 5000-3000BC, the practice of collective secondary burial thrived. Chang Kwang-chih (1968, 103) reports that due to the lineage arrangement in the village cemetery at this time it is probable that the “cult of the ancestors” had already began. Although collective secondary burial was never a dominant practice, it is nevertheless revealing as it implies not only the will and the ability for what must have been a large mobilization of labour for such an intensive task, (there were up eighty skeletons in one pit), but also implies that the ancestors were being remembered, perhaps for many years or months, between the primary and secondary burial.

The favourable conditions of the Neolithic in China led to the establishment and continuing development of many villages and eventually to the development of the Bronze Age capital cities of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, the Three Dynasties. The transition from the Neolithic villages to the Bronze Age cities should be seen “as successive phases of a single cultural development” with a high degree of cultural homogeneity and continuity (Fairbank 1992, 35). This continuity of culture, mentioned in the introduction, and argued throughout, is the cultural web of significance, being the plans, recipes, rules, or instructions for the regulation and control of self and social behaviour.

The picture of ancient China as was once understood, especially by the readings and interpretations of the Classics and ancient Chinese histories, is now considered incorrect. The three ancient dynasties of the Xia, Shang and Zhou, were not only centered in three different areas, but also appear to have co-existed. Before that, and during the times traditionally attributed to the reign of the sage-kings Yao and Shun, a culture built around sacrifices to ancestors and nature spirits gradually assimilated with other cultural communities, heralding the first Bronze Age dynasty of the Xia. Interaction among these Neolithic farming villages, (numbering in

excess of one thousand), resulted in kinship networks and other associations, which gradually provided the conditions for regional centralized political control. As a result, many family networks or lineages each developed their own separate towns and villages.

During the Three Dynasties, a fluid and dynamic situation developed where prominent clans jostled with each other for influence over other clans and villages. This clan-based socio-political dynamic is a well-known characteristic of the ancient Chinese state. Another important socio-political feature of ancient China, from the family, clan, village to city and state, is that they became highly stratified along genealogical lines. The lineage system of ancient China, due to lack of sufficient data, is not fully understood, but what is not doubted is that political structures and their make-up were determined genealogically. The link between genealogy, and by inference the ancestors, to politics is well exemplified by the development of Chinese towns. The thousands of towns that dotted the Three Dynasties political landscape were linked together – by invisible lines as it were – into hierarchical systems of administrative control and wealth distribution, and the town hierarchies largely coincided with the hierarchies of clans and lineages. These towns were underpinned socially and culturally by their ancestral relations. They were not “a spontaneous accumulation of population or capital or facilities of production (Needham 1971, 71).” They were merely a sum-total of individuals, each of whom was closely linked with the village from which the family originated and where its ancestral clan temple stood

Over time the thousands of small networked towns which dotted the ancient landscape gradually developed into larger political units as the weaker were overcome and subjugated. The states of Xia, Shang, and Zhou were the most important but they were not the sole political power. John K Fairbank (1992, 39) gives an account of this process and some idea of the number of towns at this time when he writes that the Zhou, centered around the Wei River valley, grew powerful enough to defeat the Shang around 1040BC. “Each side mobilized from seven to eight hundred villages or petty ‘states’.”

The Bronze Age rulers, indicating the importance of the social realm, were, besides political rulers, also religious leaders. However this social-religious connection was not restricted to the elite or to royalty.

“The worship of his ancestors is also a part of the state ceremonial, but in performing this the sovereign does not stand alone - the worship of their

forefathers has always been the practice of all the Chinese people” (Legge 1880, 69).

Due to the many restrictions and proscriptions concerning the worship of ancestors on the correct performance of rituals imposed by the Confucian texts, it is often supposed that this was actually the historical case. Over-time, the formal and elite practice of ancestor worship spread downwards among the common people. Since those ancient times, ancestor worship has been practiced by much of the population of China, and it has remained an essential part of Chinese religious practice and culture until modern times.

As the ultimate interest of this book is an understanding Chinese culture, it is important to notice the cultural homogeneity of the ancient Chinese and the smooth transition from the Neolithic to what seemed like a timeless traditional culture. This cultural homogeneity contrasts sharply with the variety of peoples and cultures found in what we once called and supposed to be the *cradle of civilization*, in the ancient Middle East. In stark contrast with ancient China, the early Mesopotamian cultures, the cradle of Western civilization, clashed continuously for thousands of years in a flux of Middle Eastern warfare and politics. Due to the effectiveness of their culturally formed socio-political institutions and methods, the Chinese, and felt at ease with their cultural position in relation to other peoples and cultures on their periphery. Being content they found themselves assimilating others more so than dominating them through military conquest – harmony was more important than dominance. Furthermore, China’s geographic isolation added to the mix of conditions that enabled cultural and political unity. The archaeological discoveries of the last two decades are not only enough to remind us that China is the oldest continuous civilization in existence, but they also indicate that during the formative stages of development China was a separate developmental entity, isolated geographically from other early civilizations.

By the end of the beginning of the Iron Age (600-500B.C.) and the start of the (text-evidential) age marked by Classical literature, the Chinese people were at that time an isolated and unified culture unmatched anywhere else. Chinese culture was already and would continue to be, a culture dominated by the socio-political. The commercial, military, religious, and artistic realms, which were often dominant in other cultures, found themselves subordinate to the socio-political realm – the realm structured around the family, its heirs, and especially its antecedents. John

K Fairbank (1992, 45) has a view of this situation closer to my own with his use of the term *culturalism* in the quote below, when he says:

“It would be an error for us today, so long accustomed to the modern sentiment of nationalism, to imagine ancient China as an embryonic nation-state. We would do better to apply the idea of culturalism and see ancient China as a complete civilization comparable to Western Christendom, within which nation-states like France and England became political sub-units that shared their common European culture” (Fairbank 1992, 45).

The important point I want to make here is that ancestor worship played a pivotal role, both in the development of the political sphere in China, and also by promoting the socio-political to sphere to eminence. David Keightley (1990, 31) hypothesizes that ancient Chinese ancestor worship provided the conditions and impetus for the “hierarchical, proto-bureaucratic conceptions” of the Bronze Age Chinese, and for “more secular forms of government [that] replaced the Bronze Age theocracy”. The patrimonial-theocratic state gradually transformed into a more secular institution during the Neolithic-Bronze Age transition but the importance of the ancestors never waned. The Chinese state, as it might be recognized politically today, emerges at the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty; however its culture had developed long ago.

Here, in the embryonic period of Chinese culture, can be found the connections and correlations between ancestor worship, and the well recognized juxtaposition of the family (writ large) and with the political realm – a social-political nexus, almost unconsciously centering on ancestor worship. My goal in this section is to emphasize the connections between the Chinese practice of ancestor worship and the Chinese social and political realms. It is also a strategic goal which attempts to stress the high value placed upon the political and social realms, and to show their intrinsic correlations, both with each other and with ancestor worship.

## Who were the ancestors?

It has been established that ancestor worship has been practiced in China from ancient times. However, who was worshiping whom is not as clear as it first seems. That is, what exactly is meant by the word *ancestor* in the term, and indeed the act of ancestor worship? This question concerns not only the ancient understanding of the term, but also its pre-modern and modern understanding. From the time of Confucius, when he

is quoted in the *Analects* (2: 24) as saying that “to sacrifice to ancestors not one’s own is considered presumptuous” (Waley 1996, 23), to De Groot, who wrote that there is “a prevailing social rule which forbids their contributing in any way to other people’s ancestral sacrifices” (Baker 1979, 76), the term *ancestor worship* has been clearly distinguished from merely the *worship of the dead*. As a general principle we can say that other people’s dead were of little concern and that the only dead to be worshipped were one’s own. However who exactly were one’s own dead was not always a straightforward matter.

Early ancestor worship, from about 4500BC, was of the group type where worship was conducted both for and on behalf of the entire community. Later, around c.2600-2000BC, it moved towards worship of individuals (Li 1999, 602). To be sure, the term *ancestor worship* should be distinguished from just the worship of the dead, but the distinguishing features are more nuanced and ones of emphasis and not of delineation. When considering ancestor worship in its wide historical and social scope as this work does, it is apparent that the answer to the question, who were the ancestors, is a complex and complicated matter of significance.

This complexity is significant in two ways: on the one hand it is significant due to the interrelationship between ancestor worship and every other important aspect of Chinese culture and society; and on the other hand the complexity of ancestor worship should be understood as the complexity of certain customs and manners at particular times and places which fall within the greater understanding or phenomenon of ancestor worship in its overarching cultural role. Who was worshipped, and which ancestor was worshipped, was a matter of local custom and present circumstance. What was not a matter of custom and local circumstance was that the ancestors were always, to a greater or lesser degree, worshipped. Besides the regional variations of concepts of Chinese ancestors and patterns of ancestral worship, these concepts and patterns of worship have been subject to change throughout history, most often relating to general historical socio-political transformations.

### **Ancestors: an historical view**

There are many regional and historical variations as will be seen from the outline provided below. Li Liu (1999, 603) has suggested four types of ancestors in ancient China, from the apparently egalitarian group to the individual within a stratified society. During the Neolithic period, a period

of about 10,000 years, the ritual changed from group ancestor worship to individual ancestor worship, and parallel to this, indicating its close relationship with the socio-political aspects of the culture, was the transition of social organization from non-stratified to stratified. Neolithic ritual practices were not static and the types of ancestors and the way they were worshipped were modified over time.

The first type described by Li is the group-ancestor worship of the Yangshao culture (c. 4500-4200 BC). The ancestors were probably communal ancestors, belonging to and advantageous to the entire community. Some secondary burial sites, also at Yangshao (c. 4300-4000 BC), are examples of the second type, distinguished by their exclusion of females from the community of ancestors. A noticeable transition occurred around 2500-2300BC at Yangshan when worship of individuals was first identified. This third type of ancestor group although economically similar, most probably included important religious or military men who “continuously received ritual offerings for many years”. In the fourth type of ancestor worship (and by inference ancestor) observed at Longshan culture sites (c. 2600-2000 BC), we see the culmination of transition from group to individual worship, from the early Neolithic flat social system to a stratified and hierarchical bronze age social system. The latter form of this ritual practice seems to have deeply influenced the religious and political systems of the Shang dynasty (and probably the Xia’s – but empirical evidence is scarce).

The Shang put an enormous effort into their worship of the ancestors. The ancestral tombs were rectangular pits accessed by ramps and steps leading down to the burial chamber where the coffin was situated. Surrounding the coffin were many ornate objects of pottery and bronze, such as eating utensils, “weapons, helmets, masks and ornaments, carved objects in jade, bone ivory and stone, musical instruments, oracle bones and shells with inscriptions” (Milston 1978, 50). The Shang people regarded sacrificial rituals as a crucial part of life. One recent study found that eighteen different kinds of offerings were made in a single year. The performance of all these rites occupied 110 days out of each year and the most offerings were to the ancestors (Fu 2003, 638).

By the end of the Shang period, around 1100 BC, many cultural *significants* were already in place and the one dominant *significant* ancestor worship and its related “practice of divination by scapulamancy (bones) and plastromancy (tortoise shells), and the emphasis on family